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## Newspaper Accounts Of Gypsy Lives In The 2005 Election Year: An Examination Of The Representations And Misrepresentations Of Gypsy Identity

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**Newspaper accounts of Gypsy lives in the 2005 election year: an examination of the representations and misrepresentations of Gypsy identity.**

**Dissertation submitted for Master of Research (MRes) at The Open University**

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# **Newspaper accounts of Gypsy lives in the 2005 election year: an examination of the representations and misrepresentations of Gypsy identity.**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the heightened interest in Gypsies demonstrated by newspapers in particular, (but also other media and politicians), during the 2005 election campaign. It will examine how representations made about Gypsy culture, lifestyle and identity often fail to engage accurately with the realities of Gypsy lives. In doing so it will consider what implications the election had for perpetuating or exaggerating some historically commonplace misrecognitions of Gypsies. The paper argues that the processes by which Gypsies are misrepresented are intrinsically bound to the processes by which society understands and shapes itself. The 'othering' of Gypsy communities helps to shape and make readable societal boundaries.

# **Newspaper accounts of Gypsy lives in the 2005 election year: an examination of the representations and misrepresentations of Gypsy identity.**

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## 1. Introduction

The genesis for this paper was a journey from southeast London to York on Monday 21 March 2005. I was travelling to the British Sociological Association (BSA) conference to deliver a paper about the experiences of Gypsy families living on a large site in London and their relationships with the local area and its institutions. Stopping at a newsagent on the way to Honor Oak station I came away with copies of *The Sun* and *The Independent*, both of which led with full front page spreads focusing on the lives of Gypsies. *The Sun* accused the government of handing out large amounts of cash to Gypsies and *The Independent* asked the question 'are these Britain's most demonised people?'

A few days previously I had spent a frustrating day visiting the site where I was interviewing families. There was a degree of confusion over times and where exactly potential interviewees would be at any given time. After several hours and an increasingly depleted mobile phone battery I retreated to a local pub for lunch. It was, and still is, a depressing establishment, usually deserted during the daylight hours; I was however approached by a man trying to sell me a dog. I didn't need a dog, but having made his informal introductions he warned me off the local area as it was 'full of gyppos and blacks and Irish'. As I finished my Guinness he apologised for any offence if my family was Irish and warned me that the 'gavvers' sometimes kept an eye on the pub car park for potential drunk drivers. *Gavvers* is the Romany word for police that, like other Romany words, has crossed into general non-Gypsy usage.

Travelling to the BSA conference reading the newspaper stories what struck me was that they spoke of an engagement between Gypsy and non-Gypsy worlds, but, they did not speak about the types of engagement I observed. In part this paper is interested in why certain representations are made about Gypsies and what they say about the relation between Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities.

There is a significant body of work that considers the lives and experiences of Gypsies including work that examines media representations, there is however no detailed account of British press representations made during the 2005 general election year. Although Gypsies are no strangers to hostile media coverage, 2005 was a year in which an exceptional amount of media attention focused on their lives. By and large the coverage depicted Gypsies and their lifestyles in a negative light and this was particularly true of a campaign orchestrated by *The Sun* newspaper under the slogan 'Stamp on the

*Camps'*. 2005 was also the year Tony Blair called a general election and for the third time in succession led New Labour to victory. The Conservatives under Michael Howard's leadership brought the issue of Gypsy politics into mainstream political debate by placing full-page advertisements into a number of Sunday newspapers on the day before my journey to York. These suggested the Labour government was kowtowing to the Human Rights Act and bending the rules on planning permission in favour of Gypsy groups. Using Gypsies as targets for incendiary and abusive rhetoric has not been restricted to politicians on the right however, amongst high-profile Labour MP's, Jack Straw notoriously delineated Gypsy ethnicity in terms of criminality and dirt in 1999 (Straw, 1999). This paper examines the newspaper coverage generated around Gypsies in 2005 and considers some of the impact felt as a result of the general election.

### *1.1 Aims and objectives*

This paper will explore the ways in which the lives of Gypsies are used to produce a figure of the Gypsy that has a credible resonance within popular imaginations. In particular it looks at the production of this figure in newspaper and other media accounts, but it also considers other related representations such as those of politicians who may find it useful to buy into the media accounts. It will consider how and why a particular figure of the Gypsy emerges. Often representations of Gypsies by the non-Gypsy world are distorted (Holloway, 2003; Mayall, 2004; Okely, 1983), this paper will consider why such misrepresentations retain their potency for wider society. The resonances around the figure of the Gypsy within the wider community will be examined in order to understand its usefulness as a device to demarcate boundaries around society. Although such boundaries are often physical and spatial, more often it is the demarcation of psychic boundaries determined by notions of taste, decency and what it means to be a native that impact on Gypsy communities' daily lives. Newspaper coverage will be analysed that demarcates societal visions of both the psychic and the spatial boundaries. The impact of such representations on the construction of Gypsy identity will be assessed and placed into the context of its long history of misrepresentation by dominant society.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

There are historical and established representations, (and misrepresentations), of Gypsies that materialise both within the UK and elsewhere (Hancock, 1987) and these will be compared to the tenor of coverage during the election period. By providing a comparable basis it is possible to question whether or not the interest in Gypsies in an intense period of political life reflects either a change in their representation or a reiteration of already



established understandings of Gypsy culture. This in turn informs another question posed by the research, which is to understand how the representation of Gypsy identity within the media reflects dominant society's production of boundaries around itself.

The research will test the degree to which 2005 saw a significant and greater amount of interest generated in the lives of Gypsy communities than might be expected during other years. This is measured not just quantitatively within the amount of coverage throughout the year but also, and more importantly, within qualitative senses such as the tone of such coverage. It will also ask whether or not political contexts related to the General Election had any bearing on the scope of coverage that was generated.

### *1.3 Research Design*

Primarily this project is conceived as a qualitative, discursive analysis of the documentary evidence that exists in the form of newspaper articles, advertisements and political speeches. Having gathered these materials for the whole year they will initially be analysed to establish a narrower and more time specific *moment* when the topic of Gypsies appears to be at its height. Within this *moment* the types of representation that are being made about Gypsy culture and the figure of a Gypsy that emerges within these representations will be considered in greater detail. The wider political context is important because it highlights how such representations relate to understandings of the nation state and of the cultural boundaries of the dominant society. The qualitative approach will be used to answer those research questions driven primarily from a qualitative perspective; that is, questions about what sort of representations and misrepresentations are being made and how these relate to historic representations, how notions of identity, (both of the dominant population and the minority group), are shaped by such representations and how an understanding of the British nation-state might be constructed within these representations.

A small amount of quantitative work is also built into the project in order to look at the scale of newspaper coverage in 2005. In order to contextualise the qualitative approach this will, in a fairly specific sense, answer the question of whether or not there is a significant increase in the amount of coverage of Gypsy issues in the year. It will however need to be linked closely with the qualitative analysis of the type of material that is being produced; in conjunction qualitative and quantitative approaches will provide a more accurate understanding of the scale of coverage.

#### *1.4 Ethics*

This project is based upon material that is to be found within the public domain, that is newspaper articles and political speeches. Some of these refer to specific individuals, groups or communities who if they were the subject of my own research, (Gypsy families I interviewed for example), I would generally seek to disguise their identities and be discreet about their whereabouts. I have assumed however that where individuals are featured prominently and identifiably on the pages of national and local newspapers there is neither a need to disguise their identity, nor anything that could constructively be done to do so. I have applied this to both members of Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities and to various politicians who appear in the text of articles.

In passing this paper also refers to other work I have been engaged with, often interviewing Gypsy families and educational staff. This work was funded initially by the University of Greenwich and later by a London borough. The work was conducted under the ethics guidelines of both the University of Greenwich and the British Educational Research Association. For the purposes of this article where brief mentions of this work occur these guidelines obviously remain intact. In particular references to individuals or communities are either anonymised or described in a generic fashion, (e.g. 'a London Borough' rather than 'the London Borough of \_\_\_\_').

There are two specific issues around ethics that need to be raised in relation to work that examines the lives of Gypsy communities. Firstly is to recognise that there may well be differences in what ethics means to a Gypsy community compared to what is understood within the academic world. What constitutes a process of anonymisation may be understood very differently. In terms of this particular piece of work the possibilities for a clash in ethical understandings are probably slight, but this remains something to be considered as the work progresses. Secondly, there is the positioning of Gypsy scholarship and its tendency to openly side with Gypsy communities. Bhopal (2005) has suggested that many Gypsy scholars<sup>1</sup> prefer to stick up for Gypsy rights rather than produce accounts that might imply any criticism of their subjects. It is in the nature of this particular piece of work that it is unlikely to offend the world of Gypsy scholars; but, again it is an issue that is worth keeping in mind. The need for some distance from the subject matter is healthy. Finally, and to underline the sensitivities at play here, these two different issues may not work well in tandem; giving due regard to the ethics demanded

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<sup>1</sup> By 'Gypsy scholars' I refer to scholars doing work on Gypsy culture and lifestyles regardless of their personal heritage.

from a Gypsy perspective may not sit comfortably with notions of a non-Gypsy objective account.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Accounts of Gypsies*

There is a considerable amount of literature that examines the lives, history and culture of Gypsies. This generally splits into work that on the one hand considers the Gypsy experience internationally, that is the Gypsy diaspora from northern India to Europe and beyond, linguistics and global political interests; and, on the other hand examines domestic issues often around single concerns such as education or health care. Domestic and international literatures inform each other to some degree but there is a noticeable trend towards either underlining the historic transnational troubles associated with different groups of Gypsies or alternatively contributing work towards domestic policy issues. So for example Hancock (1987) provides an exhaustive account of the worldwide Gypsy diaspora, its persecutions and the responses made by Gypsy communities on the one hand; and, Derrington and Kendall (2004) provide a descriptive account of the education of Gypsy children of secondary school age in the UK on the other. Whilst both books cover some similar ground, (the racism faced by Gypsies for example), they are books that are clearly positioned in different ways with different audiences in mind. What is interesting in much of the work written about Gypsies, including the two examples given, is that to some degree much of this work assumes a campaigning stance attempting to improve the material conditions under which Gypsies live and understandings of Gypsy culture. Hancock for example, engages with international political debates and the promotion of an understanding of the Gypsy diaspora within intellectual discourse; Derrington and Kendall have a more modest agenda meanwhile, attempting to improve the provision of education for Gypsy children in the UK. Whilst such stances are entirely understandable responses to the at times barbaric treatment of many Gypsy groups, Bhopal (2005) has drawn attention to the associated trend amongst some Gypsy scholars to claim ownership of the groups they study. One consequence is a tendency to ring-fence 'their' subjects with over-protective zeal on the basis that a new or unknown researcher may intend to criticise or undermine Gypsies.

## 2.2 History and identity

Within scholarly accounts of the Gypsy diaspora there has been a significant schism in interpretations of the Gypsy diaspora. The most generally accepted account argues that Gypsies migrated from northern India across the Middle East and into Europe some 1000 to 1500 years ago (Acton, 1974; Kenrick & Puxon, 1972; Hancock, 1987; Clark & Greenfields, 2006). Much of the evidence for this rests upon linguistic analysis and comparison of north Indian and Romani languages and of cultural practices of people associated with these languages (Hancock 1988). The anthropologist Judith Okely has articulated the most significant critique of this account suggesting that the connection with India is exaggerated and does not do justice to a fluid and changing relationship with other itinerant groups over long periods of time (Okely 1983 & 1997). Whilst most scholarship has continued to add evidence to the claims around a migration from India, Okely's most significant contribution has perhaps been to argue strongly for the need to engage with the lives of groups identified as Gypsies today rather than concentrating on a somewhat nebulous past; that is to understand who Gypsies are today rather than who they *might have been*, based upon a series of historic events and accounts not marked by a compelling sense of accuracy. Toninato identifies a significant gap in knowledge between academic accounts often by non-Gypsies of the history of Gypsy people and the accounts given by Gypsies themselves of their origins (Toninato 2006). This project will be informed by discourses produced within the media around the construction of representations of Gypsies and as such will inevitably be situated within discourses about the representation of Gypsies rather than reflecting an anthropological examination of their lives. The impact such representations have upon the lives of Gypsy communities however, can often be very dramatic. Specific accounts of who can and cannot be considered an authentic or real Gypsy have long fed into legalistic understandings of Gypsy ethnicity and, as Acton (1992) notes, almost the only legal and political defence against racism is to be able to claim membership of a legitimate ethnic grouping. Richardson (2006) uses the example of the effects of planning laws constituted within the non-Gypsy world and the discourses they are engaged with about Gypsies and their relations to such laws to demonstrate how power is manipulated and used to control Gypsy groups.

The history of the Gypsy diaspora, the Gypsy nation, and, the historical representations made about Gypsies are themselves important touchstones with which to understand Gypsy identity. Hall (2003) describes two parallel definitions of identity. The first is based on a single shared collective 'self' that lies buried within individual definitions of

the self. These individual selves maybe more superficial or may be artificially constructed but they cannot disguise the wider traces of shared histories and ancestry. Hall's second definition of identity recognises not only similarities but also the significant differences between individual narratives. This definition of identity does not just look back to the past seeing identity in terms of *who we were* or *where we have come from*. Instead, it incorporates the historical with a sense of where the individual has *arrived* at now and where s/he will be tomorrow. In this sense identity is a process; one that is never truly complete:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". (Hall 2003:236)

There are some contentious issues raised by Hall's definitions of identity, not least that it is driven by very Western understandings of the world and the way it has been shaped by the slave trade. Within Hall's understanding the Gypsy nation appears slightly meaningless; devoid of homelands (real or imaginary) and prone to splintering in order to survive. However, it forms a useful starting point to consider the use of narrative structures within Gypsy identity that are continued throughout the work of the newspaper accounts under examination.

### *2.3 Nomenclature and Terminology*

The words Gypsy, Traveller and Roma (amongst others) are used by and about Gypsy groups often to indicate memberships of different groups. Bhopal (2004) and Clark & Greenfields (2006) offer some comprehensive accounts of different nomenclature and the different ways it may be used including the negative connotations that are often associated with the term 'Gypsy' and also increasingly to 'Traveller'. As a result many Gypsy communities do not use certain terms to describe themselves. In the media the term 'Traveller' has seemingly become more acceptable than 'Gypsy' though both terms are in current usage. Hancock (1987) also notes that often these terms are applied to groups who are *perceived* as belonging to them rather than having any real connection. My work uses the word 'Gypsy' to indicate an engagement with a range of groups who may not easily sit together but who within wider societal understandings are linked.

### *2.4 Representation of Gypsies*

Many representations of Gypsies are constructed by non-Gypsies within frameworks that do not reflect the experiences or lives of Gypsy communities. These include

representations of Gypsies as either dirty vagrants or alternatively exoticised others, and, of distinctions drawn between real, authentic Gypsies and inauthentic, half-caste Gypsies (Okely 1983, Mayall 2004). Inaccurate and stereotypical representations of Gypsies inevitably seem to inform the basis upon which Gypsies are treated within society (Liegeois 1987) and the consequences of such representation has a direct and negative impact on their lives. Mayall (2004) discusses attempts at legally defining authentic Gypsies which have tended to privilege an idea of a pure Indian bloodline; one direct consequence of such categorisation is that many Gypsies who do not exhibit such purity are categorised as not being *real* Gypsies but as a lesser *other*. Similarly the exoticisation of Gypsies often within imagery of painted wagons, smoky campfires and the wistful notes of a fiddle caught high in the wind are used against Gypsies encountered in real life who do not live up to such images (Hancock 1987, Liegeois 1987, Mayall 2004). One result of such engagement has been the continuing failure of the state to provide adequate sites or to refuse many Gypsy families access to facilities on the basis that they are not *real* Gypsies (Okely 1983). There are a number of ways in which the ‘otherness’ of Gypsies can be understood including taking Simmel’s (1908) description of the *stranger* who primarily does not belong because he originates from outside the spatial boundaries of society but is resident within these boundaries. The stranger is useful because it is a figure that highlights intense feelings of ambiguity and unease within society. More recently Vanderbeck (2003) has argued that discourses that emerged around the Tony Martin affair, (when a 16 year old Gypsy burglar was shot dead by the homeowner after breaking into his house), demonstrated the reiteration of conventional distinctions between authentic and inauthentic ethnic notions of Gypsies allied to the political and social agendas of social exclusion. He argues that within the rural context a new socially excluded underclass is created into which Gypsies, (cast as inauthentic), are subsumed. Bhopal and Myers (2005) have also noted the slightly oxymoronic notion of self-exclusion that emerged in urban localities where Gypsy communities identified their interests with their poor white working class neighbours. In terms of more recent debates about the creation of socially excluded ‘others’ there is a need to carefully distinguish between processes that create a racialised white underclass which may well be relevant in part to Gypsy identity formation and the more historic processes of exclusion that have related to Gypsies. Some interesting parallels can be drawn between Gypsy experiences and Hartigan’s (1997) descriptions of the creation of ‘white trash’ in Detroit. The use of name-calling in particular in order to demarcate and maintain class and racial boundaries where,

white trash is a cultural figure and a rhetorical identity, it is a means of inscribing social distance and insisting upon a contempt-laden social divide, particularly (though not exclusively) between whites. (Hartigan, 1997:50)

There are clear resonances with the use of terms of abuse such as 'pikey' or 'gyppo' to identify Gypsies and also non-Gypsies who are then associated with the under-class status of Gypsies.

As discussed a figure of the Gypsy emerges in the newspaper accounts of 2005 rather than accounts of the lives of Gypsies. In many ways this reflects the historic pattern by which Gypsies have been represented in wider society since their first appearance in Britain. A 'figure' of the Gypsy emerges in these accounts that has resonances with Foucault's concept of a 'figure' that is a genealogically produced subject position (Foucault 1987, 1998). There are limitations to the Foucauldian analysis because of its over-emphasis upon social constructionism, at the expense of the activities and engagement of the people who not only are classified by wider society as Gypsies, but who often also classify themselves as Gypsies. The purpose of this work is to establish not so much the effects of such representations on the self, (that is Gypsies as subjects), but rather the role Gypsies play within society. So rather than considering the ethical work Gypsies may engage with in order to establish their subject position within British society (Foucault 1984a, 1984b), it will consider what the representations being made say about society. In this sense Foucault is useful to understand something of the historical moment but this needs to be placed within a context in which communities and the boundaries that exist around them are understood.

The emergence of a figure or of an identity that is not only imbued 'to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples' (Taylor, 1992:31) is examined as a dialogic emergence within Taylor's reflections on liberal society and the politics of recognition. Substantial criticisms of Taylor have been made by Hesse (1999) who suggests the politics of recognition is dogmatically based upon Western liberalism and as such reflects the politics of American and European colonialism; and also by Parekh (1995), who similarly suggests that the dialogue within liberalism is not open-ended but hugely constrained by liberal dogmatism. These are important criticisms in the context of understanding the positioning of Gypsy culture within liberal western society, there is a clear sense that part of the 'otherness' experienced in Gypsy culture is related to strict boundaries around different cultures and

the failure to recognise any validity attached to Gypsy culture within western thought. However, a dialogical approach to this project will still, to some extent, inform both the theoretical understanding of the data and also inform the ethical tone of the scholarship itself and the relation between researcher and data. Bakhtin's (1990) work on dialogical language provides a very useful starting point to understand the use of language and in particular the different cadences and ambiguities that different voices may adopt within the text. The emphasis on text is also an obviously relevant analytical position to assume when the data under consideration is derived from newspaper accounts. Whilst at first sight newspapers may appear to represent a very singular voice rather than the *heteroglossia* celebrated within Bakhtin's accounts of the novel, they are enterprises based upon an ongoing dialogue between those who produce newspapers, (proprietors, editors, journalists and photographers), and readerships who are engaged in the endless flux of culture and fashion. Maybin notes that,

language originates in social interactions and struggle and that these are always implicated in its use of and meaning (2001:64)

and for newspapers one element of this interaction is to understand the interaction itself and use that understanding to produce material that sells. There is a clear *dialogical contact* between author and reader.

### 2.5 Media Conduct

In June 2005 the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner stated,

to judge by the levels of invective that can regularly be read in the national press, Gypsies would appear to be the last ethnic minority in respect of which openly racist views can still be acceptably expressed. I was truly amazed by some of the headlines, articles and editorials that were shown to me. Such reporting would appear to be symptomatic of a widespread and seemingly growing distrust of Gypsies resulting in their discrimination in a broad range of areas. (Gil-Robles 2005)

The BBC has a detailed set of *Editorial Guidelines* (BBC) covering a diverse range of topics they consider to be sensitive, these range from *academics* to *the watershed* by way of *streakers* and *prisoners on the run*; there are however no guidelines on how Gypsy stories should be approached. The Commission for Racial Equality has issued *Guidance*



for *Journalists on Reporting Race Issues* (CRE) which includes a section on *Travellers, Gypsies and the Media*. The National Union of Journalists' *Code of Conduct* and the Press Complaints Commission's *Code of Practice* both require journalists not to publish racist work or work that uses derogatory language based on ethnicity or belonging to particular social groups. Morris (2000) evidences the persistent failures of journalists to live up to these respective codes when their subject matter is Gypsy communities.

### **3. Methodological approaches**

A dialogical approach will be used in this work in order that the researcher's voice engages in a dialogue with the data sources; that is with the content of newspaper articles and political speeches. This is perhaps a slightly self-conscious process, but by doing so I intend making clear my own authorial positioning and also ensuring that whilst doing the work I am consciously considering where and how that positioning takes place. Other similar dialogues match my own engagement with the data sources, those of the various newspaper articles and political speeches with wider culture. This engagement, and it's a longstanding engagement, a dialogue that has persisted for more than 500 years representing the engagement between British and Gypsy culture informs the more specific aims this paper seeks to question. Mayerfield Bell suggests it is,

useful to consider culture as dialogue. The metaphor of dialogue is broadly applicable to the question of culture, I believe. Or should I say the questioning of culture (Mayerfield Bell 1998:49).

Developing his argument around ideas of how research should be undertaken within a dialogue Mayerfield Bell notes the following 'homey ideals' as the basis upon which a positive dialogue can proceed, 'care, consideration, honesty, straightforwardness, responsibility' (1998:58). By engaging with such ideals Mayerfield Bell suggests it should be possible to produce work that can be understood outside of the academic context.

In addition to the rather sickly sweet tones of such polite dialogue, this work will also be undertaken using the type of anti-methodological stance suggested by Billig (1988). Billig notes that methodologies generally suggest the use of impersonal sets of procedures to inform data collection and analysis. The advantage of such approaches is

the apparent clarity by which the researcher signals an adherence to objective and valid work; another researcher entering the field could be expected to mimic the processes and replicate the results. In its place Billig suggests a return to traditional scholarship in which the researcher relies more upon 'hunches and specialist knowledge' (1988:199), such an approach embraces rather than scorns 'individual quirkiness' (1988:200) for example. There are a number of reasons for choosing this approach. Firstly, as discussed the genesis for this work was the collision of a small timeframe when the work I was carrying out and the wider agendas of newspapers and politicians seemingly met. The germ of the idea was generated by these coincidences, and, whilst it might have occurred anyway, it would seem slightly disingenuous to ignore the fact. Reading *The Sun* and *The Independent* on the train travelling north to York I was clearly engaged in at least three processes that have resulted in this article. Firstly I was reading the journalistic accounts in the light of knowledge about Gypsy culture and the representations that have historically made about Gypsies; I was in other words inevitably applying specialist knowledge to this process. Secondly, in addition to a specialist knowledge, there was an empathic involvement; I was talking to a number of families at the time whose lives mirrored those described in the newspaper accounts, that is Gypsy families living in trailers. The sense of empathy was in many cases stronger because the newspaper accounts tended, (in the case of *The Sun* for example), to vilify and misrepresent Gypsy lives. The final process involved was undoubtedly more opportunistic; having recently abandoned a perfectly good career as a policy advisor at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in favour of a move towards less lucrative and less secure research work and a potential future career within academia; I was on the train to York already making some notes about what I could write about these events. If Billig suggests a scholarship based on 'hunches and specialist knowledge', I would also probably want to add naked, opportunistic ambition into the mix as well.

There are a number of alternative methodologies that could be utilised to establish an objective distance between myself and the data, the most obvious being to go down the path of a content analysis. However even an approach like this would need to be contextualised within wider, and already personalised, understandings of the data. The question would surface why I am doing content analysis on, (for example), a page of text from *The Sun* dated 21 March 2005? The answer would still be located within the personal and empathic engagement and within the understandings of where this discourse sits within wider narratives about Gypsies. It would also to a large degree restrict the discussions about those discourses and all the meanings that I am aware of, (and want to

discuss), within newspaper accounts, political speeches and the daily lives of communities.

Another alternative strategy to impose greater distance between myself and the proposed analysis was to devise a survey to examine how people understand representations of Gypsies in the press. I am primarily dissuaded from this approach because this would entail a survey of current attitudes to Gypsy representation rather than a recollection of representations made during election year. Since the election there has been greater coverage of Gypsies from the perspective of east European migration as a consequence of changes to European Union legislation and this would undoubtedly have an effect on the data collected. Whilst this appears in a context that remains understandable in terms of historic representations of the figure of the Gypsy it also distances respondents from a specific historical moment. That moment – election year 2005 – is of course identified within my own personal 'hunch' as being a significant moment of representation. In order to provide an element of objective validity to this hunch and some degree of triangulation a small-scale quantitative analysis will be made on the amount of coverage that might be expected in any given year of Gypsy stories.

In different ways Billig and Mayerfield Bell both suggest fairly personal though ultimately still very robust approaches. They sit very comfortably within the wide range of, as Mason (1996) notes, extremely diverse work that might be considered to encompass 'qualitative methods'. For Mason such work should be holistic in its ability to engage with different social contexts and understandings including the researcher's own set of biases and engagement with subject matter. Even clearer statements of the researcher's need to be clearly situated within the research project can be found in Denzin's description of ethnography as,

that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about. (1997:xi).

Denzin's (1997, 2001) work develops progressively from his earlier engagement and critique of *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1988) to his proposal of a 'seventh moment' in which the researcher is both politically engaged and that standpoint clearly stated to the reader. Such a positioning in many ways produces another rigid categorisation of work practices that, like methodology, can be challenged to some degree through Billig's notion of scholarship. However it does demonstrate the scope of

research practices and the established grounds upon which Billig's anti-methodological approach can be understood.

## 4. Collecting Data

### 4.1 Primary Data

#### *Newspaper transcripts*

All the UK national newspapers ran stories about Gypsies in 2005. This research concentrates on the stories that appeared in *The Sun* and *The Independent*. Of these *The Sun* is largely self-selecting because of the campaigning stance the newspaper ran with under its initial by-line '*Stamp On The Camps*', their coverage is one-dimensional, overtly racist and pitched within a very singular voice. Unsurprisingly *The Independent* takes an overtly opposite approach, one that is also written in a highly campaigning style though acting as a liberal counterpoint to *The Sun*. Transcripts of stories run by both newspapers were sourced from the LexisNexis database.

The initial search criteria given to LexisNexis, (Stories run by *The Sun* and *The Independent* in 2005 featuring either the word *Gypsy* or *Traveller*), produced a difficult set of data to work with because it returned too many results; in some cases over a thousand reports from a single year's copy of one newspaper. The vast bulk of these stories had nothing whatsoever to do with Gypsies, most commonly references to 'traveller' concerned commuters. The criteria were therefore narrowed to stories that used the words 'Gypsy' or 'traveller' three times in a given story. This second set of criteria again returned far more non-Gypsy than Gypsy stories but in more manageable numbers. Those stories that did not relate specifically to Gypsies were weeded out.

The year's stories were analysed to establish a *dialogical moment* that represented the most heightened sense of engagement between competing voices talking about Gypsy lifestyles. The analysis was thematically organised around characteristic representations associated with Gypsies, such as 'scroungers', 'dirtiness', 'criminality' or 'violence'; and, also around themes that defined the year's media coverage such as planning law or law bending. These were then considered in terms of the 'tone' and 'voice' that are in play at the time. In principal looking to identify the time at which the most virulent and most violent voices are being heard at their loudest. This *moment* was identified as being

the week commencing 21 March 2005, that is the week I was travelling by train to York. During this period the hostile campaign that *The Sun* had been running became inflamed by Michael Howard's speech at the weekend. As a result almost all the national press ran with stories commenting both on Conservative strategy and the furore being whipped up by *The Sun*. For this week all other UK newspapers (local and national) were searched using the same LexisNexis criteria.

#### *The Michael Howard speech*

Other textual documents used as primary data are copies of the advertisement placed in the 20 March 2005 Sunday newspapers by the Conservative party suggesting Gypsies were being favourably treated regarding planning law and a transcript of the speech Michael Howard gave on Monday 21 March at Conservative headquarters. This (very short) speech related directly to the advertisement placed in the Sunday papers and was distributed to newspapers at the weekend in order to inform comment in Monday's newspapers. A transcript of Michael Howard's speech and the related Conservative party advertisement from the 20 March 2005 were sourced from the author's private archive, copies can be found at Appendix 1.

#### *Quantitative data*

LexisNexis was also used to identify all stories relating to Gypsies in *The Sun* and *The Independent* in each year from 2001 to 2005 in order to provide data for a quantitative analysis of the number of stories run by the media. Whilst identifying stories relating to Gypsies is relatively easy by searching LexisNexis under a number of specific terms (e.g. Gypsy, Gypsies, Traveller), care was taken to whittle away stories that repeat themselves under the LexisNexis search criteria and stories that do not relate to the ethnic category of Gypsies. Using these search terms on LexisNexis results, (amongst other anomalies) in locating unrelated stories about the Irish football club the *Bohemians* whose nickname is the Gypsies, the musical combo The Gypsy Kings and the agonies faced by commuters suffering at the hands of incompetent rail operators. As in previous LexisNexis searches the criteria for the search specified the use 3 or more times of the word *Gypsy* or *Traveller*.

#### *4.2 Secondary Data*

A number of secondary data sources were also used to identify other supportive evidence to the main data. These included:

### *Newspaper circulation figures*

ABC figures of newspaper circulation to demonstrate that *The Sun* is Britain's best-selling newspaper, (and establish how far behind *The Independent* lags).

### *BBC news accounts*

BBC news accounts that remain archived on the internet were examined in order to provide a secondary media source. One assumption at the start of the project was that different media largely recount similar themes in their portrayals of Gypsy lifestyles. This largely proved to be true; stories concerning relations between families on sites and their non-Gypsy neighbours are commonplace, whereas stories about Gypsy social occasions are generally not featured. The BBC internet news content is particularly useful because it is easy to access and also because it tends to present itself within the ethics of TV licence fees as not taking politicised sides. Its coverage does not reflect the extremes of tone associated with stories in *The Sun*, it does however cover the same stories. In some respects the BBC coverage acted as a control sample of data for the project, an example of self-reflexive objective journalistic standards<sup>2</sup>.

## **5. Analysing the data**

### *5.1 Scale of Coverage of Gypsy Stories*

Whilst most news stories have a limited shelf-life, a distinguishing feature of the media coverage in 2005 was *The Sun's* ongoing campaign against Gypsy lifestyles. This lasted several weeks and was conducted throughout its pages, there were front-page headline grabbing news stories, leader commentaries ('The Sun Says'), and, features within regular columnists commentary pieces, (notably Richard Littlejohn's columns). The effects of this campaign can be clearly seen within the increased number of stories carried by *The Sun* about Gypsies in 2005 (Table 1)

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<sup>2</sup> Before getting too carried away with the BBC's standards please also note the comments regarding editorial guidelines discussed under the media conduct section of the Literature Review. Beyond its news coverage there many occasions where the BBC has allowed presenters to use the racist term 'pikey'.

2001	24
2002	23
2003	21
2004	44
2005	121
2006	59

**Table 1. Stories in *The Sun* about Gypsies by year**

These figures suggest an increased interest in Gypsies by The Sun since 2004, which would mirror the Council of Europe's findings (Gil-Robles 2005) that increasing distrust of Gypsies was being expressed throughout the media. This quantitative data does not confirm Gil-Robles further contentions about the openly racist nature of many media portrayals of Gypsies; a discussion of the content of The Sun's coverage follows within the qualitative analysis. The increased coverage of Gypsy related stories was not matched by The Independent (Table 2.), though there does appear to be a consistent, though smaller increase in the number of stories. These were followed in 2006 by a noticeable drop off in interest.

2001	14
2002	16
2003	35
2004	40
2005	38
2006	16

**Table 2. Stories in *The Independent* about Gypsies by year**

Of the 121 stories that appeared in The Sun in 2005, just over 1/3 appeared in March. Similarly in The Independent, March was the month most stories appeared (21 out of 38 stories).

As discussed earlier one of the aims of this project is to identify a moment when coverage of Gypsy issues was at its height. In many ways identifying this moment is made relatively straightforward by the quantity of material published in March 2005. Applying my own sense of the moment, that is my being aware of the furore being whipped up by *The Sun's* coverage in particular, the week commencing the 21 March 2005 is clearly identified as the precise 'moment' that this research has sought to identify

and examine. There are a number of reasons for this beyond my own hunch at the time. Apart from the quantity of material being produced *The Sun*, other newspapers and media, were also picking up on the story and running stories of their own. The tone of much of the writing seems to heighten and, as will be discussed, an engagement between newspapers and their readers emerges in which a high degree of invective is levelled at Gypsy communities. One of the main reasons for this sudden upping of the ante appears to be the intervention of Michael Howard and the Conservative Party on the 20 March. Full page advertisements were placed in the Sunday newspapers on this date under the slogan 'I BELIEVE IN FAIR PLAY'. The text of these advertisements largely mirrored a short speech Michael Howard delivered on the Monday 21 March at 'Conservative Campaign Headquarters' (Howard 2005). The text of the speech was released to journalists on the Sunday and was widely quoted in the next day's newspapers. Copies of both the advertisement and the text of the speech accompanied by a very fetching photograph of Michael Howard appear in Appendix 1.

In the advertisement and the speech Howard clearly picks up on some of the themes that *The Sun* were using in their campaign. He suggests that everyone should abide by the same rules regardless of their background and links this to an understanding of what it means to be British and to belong to 'your community' (Howard, 2005). 'Your community' is weighted slightly oddly in the context of the speech and seems to be conflating both membership of smaller more specific communities with the wider community that is being British. When he states,

We are all British. We are one nation. (Howard, 2005)

Howard seems to be suggesting a membership of the nation that encompasses all communities and demands a strict adherence to the demands of Britishness. The linkage made to ideas of community implies that if people are not aligned with Britishness they are falling outside of notions of community. Otherness, perhaps in the shape of Bauman and Simmel's *stranger* (Bauman, 1997; Simmel, 1908) seems to come alive at this moment. Having set the scene with what is essentially a statement about belonging and not belonging within the notion of a British community, Howard goes on to make two points. The first of these is constructed around a political argument that is used to challenge Labour policy by demonstrating that the Labour Party are willing to threaten the acceptable boundaries of community/Britishness. This is specified through a suggestion that the Labour government has used the Human Rights Act to 'turn a blind



eye' to rules being broken, unlike a Conservative government who would 'uphold the law'. There is some added gravitas within the text derived from the earlier hint at Howard's being a one-nation Tory; nationhood, Britishness and community compounded together seem to recall an older and more respectable incarnation of Conservative politics, than those often understood to be typified since the last decades of the twentieth-century. The second point made by Howard, and this underpins the political argument, is that the figure of the Gypsy who he describes is shown not to belong within the nation. In the text of the speech he refers to an uncapitalised 'traveller' or 'travellers', using the Human Rights Act to openly abuse the planning system. The suggestion is that 'travellers' are able to build on land without gaining the same planning consent that everyone else has to and that they are allowed to get away with this by a weak-willed Labour government. They are not abiding by the same rules that apply to everyone else; we can only conclude therefore that they fall outside of the notion of a British community. By their own actions they define themselves as outsiders.

The immediate effect of a major political party aligning itself to the same messages as those found in the campaign run by *The Sun* was that it now became a news story in its own right. As a result coverage of the issues raised around Gypsy lifestyles appeared throughout the media. Apart from coverage in *The Sun* and *The Independent*, there were stories in nearly all the national newspapers touching on Gypsy issues that day that used discussions of Gypsy issues in regard to Conservative election campaign strategies as a starting point. In this sense the news story element relates directly to the Conservative party's intervention. However, it is also evident that there is an ongoing media interest in Gypsies from the range of other coverage that appears on the day in question that reflects an engagement with the type of material that was appearing as part of *The Sun's* campaign. It is perhaps clearest in this material that what is being spoken about by the newspapers is part of an ongoing dialogue between the producers of newspapers and their readerships. *The Daily Mail* for example carried three pieces about Gypsies. The first was a news story based on the Howard speech and the advertisements in the Sunday papers, this is contextualised by reference to changes in Irish law to criminalise trespass primarily as it applies to Gypsies and according to *The Daily Mail*,

The tough Irish laws are said to be one of the main reasons why so many travellers have moved to England (Paul Eastham, *The Daily Mail* 21 March 2005 p.1).

*The Daily Mail* also carries quotes from Keith Hill the Minister for Planning and Andrew Ryder, co-ordinator of the Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition, both of whom suggest the Conservative party are whipping up prejudice against Gypsies. This article specifically comments on the Conservative party's successes at manipulating the media away from stories that the Government and the Labour party are trying to promote. The second article featured is a longish commentary piece entitled *Travellers Tales: A Dossier of Despair* in which we learn that,

For generations, country dwellers and travellers have lived amicably side by side. Their lifestyles were radically different but traditional British tolerance saw that there was a mutual respect for one another (*The Daily Mail* 21 March 2005, p. 10).

Picking up on the earlier article suggesting an influx of Irish travellers it is suggested this state of amicable co-existence is under threat, and that 'since exposing the issue, *The Daily Mail* has been inundated with calls and emails from distraught readers whose lives have been made unbearable by these illegal sites' (21 March 2005, p.10). Eight reader's accounts then follow detailing a number of consistent themes, these predictably centre around commonly held opinions about Gypsies including their dirtiness and engagement in illegal activities. However some other very specific themes that emerge also include,

- Desecration of beauty spots and disruption to local ecologies.
- John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, would not be happy to have Gypsies living on his doorstep.
- Falling house prices.
- Gypsies getting away with law breaking whilst non-Gypsies would not be allowed to do the same.

Finally there is a short piece in which a Gypsy and a non-Gypsy respond to the question *Can Gypsies live peacefully with neighbours?* This last piece is somewhat contrived and perhaps its biggest failing is that it does not, in the end, actually allow the two opposing speakers to engage in a dialogue with each other. However on the Gypsy side it allows serious mentions to long-standing Gypsy engagements with the education system, the holocaust and the role of Gypsies fighting in the Second World War. On the non-Gypsy side the suggestion is made that the majority of people calling themselves Gypsies are in fact not 'proper gypsies' and also that these people do not belong within commonly

understood notions of 'community'. These arguments are all couched within a context of Gypsies being allowed to act in criminal or anti-social ways that would not be tolerated in the rest of the population.

*The Daily Mail's* coverage is, as would be anticipated, largely hostile to Gypsies. What seems surprising about its coverage is that it is quite detailed and reflects an engagement with its readers. Apart from the specifically news based story there is a considerable involvement with reader's lives; what seems to drive these stories is not that they are about Gypsies but rather that they are about *Daily Mail* readers. In *The Sun's* coverage of Gypsies very similar patterns emerge about the impact of Gypsy lifestyles on their reader's lives; *The Sun* mirrors a cliché about the Mail's readership by making continual reference to their readers as representing *middle England*. There is perhaps a suspicion that *The Sun* is deliberately targeting a potential sector of the newspaper readership market by adopting this approach; that is to say by targeting Gypsies with vitriolic abuse they may be able to win over some new readers from the *Daily Mail*. The nakedness of such marketing strategies can perhaps be overstated but it is noticeable that *The Sun* takes popular sentiment very seriously as a guiding light for its coverage. This is evidenced very clearly by the paper's public anti-racist statements (BECTA, 2007) in the light of the racist bullying meted out two years later to Bollywood B-list actress Shilpa Shetty in the Celebrity Big Brother House (2007).

The question *what about us?* is heard again and again in these stories almost as though some very deep inner insecurity was being exposed. It materialises regularly in stories suggesting that Gypsies are allowed to break rules, (planning law in particular), and that other law-abiding folk are not allowed to break these rules. By sticking to the law, non-Gypsies are effectively being penalised and their standard of living compromised. It materialises even more specifically in the regular calls for John Prescott to wake up one morning to find trailers parked in his back garden and for him to have to face the same demons. It seems to go beyond being faced by an unpleasant mess or a difficult or dangerous situation; there is a suggestion instead in these stories that the meaning of people's lives is simply snatched away from them. Their world and environment is desecrated, they can no longer feel safe in their homes, and they cannot move anywhere else. The suggestion of these encounters is of homelessness in its deepest and most bereft sense and the desire to inflict the same damage upon the man held responsible speaks less of revenge and more of the need to make the damage done understandable to him. Prescott was luckier than Martin Greig, a Liberal Democrat councillor in Aberdeen, who

suggested that there were parallels between apartheid in South Africa and the treatment of Travellers in Scotland. On the same weekend that the Conservatives were running their newspaper advertisements, *The Aberdeen Evening Express* decided to test Councillor Greig's tolerance, according to their reporter Sally McDonald,

We rolled up outside the Aberdeen City Lib Dem councillor's home with a 4x4 pick-up truck and our very own trailer. Then we hung up washing and put out rubbish bags. (p.4)

The appearance of this story on the same day as those being discussed in the national press gives a flavour of the *zeitgeist*, a sense of the importance being attached to the understandings of Gypsy lives and to the meanings they generated within a non-Gypsy world. These were stories that tapped into the dominant population's need to be confident in its own identity and the figure of the Gypsy that emerges seems to have a very troubling and disruptive impact on the world in which they live. Rather than an unidentified bogie man what comes across is a figure that is more well known and is almost mundane in its everydayness. It seems closer to the figure of the *stranger* unsettling through a mixture of proximity and the association with an 'otherness' that defies imagination (Simmel 1908, Bauman 1997). A boundary is created in this process and the stranger who is created is the stranger described by Ahmed as somebody who is 'already recognised as not belonging' (Ahmed 2000:21). These accounts also suggest the sense in which a 'figure' of the Gypsy emerges in the Foulcauldian sense. This figure seems constructed out of the imaginations of society and is then reproduced throughout the media. It is almost as though a distinct 'figure' of the Gypsy materialises who is not embodied in the lives of real Gypsies and yet still seems to have a real, material life of its own. The 'figure' of the Gypsy is still able to walk tall throughout society. It was the appearance of this figure that in many ways stood out whilst I read the newspapers travelling to York. The sense I felt was of a body of work being constructed in order to define what lay safely within the boundaries of community, rather than an attempt at understanding the 'other' situated outside.

## 5.2 Two Oppositional Accounts of Gypsies

As discussed *The Sun* and *The Independent* seemingly produce two very different figures of Gypsies and yet a distinct sense of 'otherness' is produced in both. On Monday 21

March 2005 they both filled their front pages with content about Gypsies. *The Sun* ran another piece in its ongoing campaign against Gypsies under the headline<sup>3</sup>,

**GIPSIES' £30M HANDOUT: Taxpayers are funding camps**

whilst *The Independent* were more openly sympathetic with,

**Are these Britain's most demonised people? Traveller's anger as Howard makes them an election issue'**.

Both newspapers pick up strongly on Michael Howard's (2005) speech at Conservative Campaign Headquarters which emphasised and built upon the content of the '*I Believe in Fair Play*' advertisement the previous day.

*The Sun*

*The Sun*'s original 'campaign' against Gypsy manipulation of planning law dates back to Thursday 10 March 2005, in which under the headline '*Stamp on the Camps*' the newspaper declared 'war on gipsy free-for-all' and warned of a Gypsy 'invasion'. This story was triggered by government advice sent by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to Local Authorities instructing them to take account of Gypsy family's needs and to consider earmarking land for Gypsies to purchase and develop. Throughout the following week and a half *The Sun* continued to run with a series of related stories targeting both Gypsies, John Prescott and the ODPM. Although Gypsies as a body of people bore the brunt of these attacks, the Deputy Prime Minister was the individual singled out for personal abuse. On the 21 March in a particularly vitriolic piece Richard Littlejohn describes how Prescott referred to in this piece as '*Two Jags*' is destroying 'ancient fields and woodlands' in his housing plans so that,

Picturesque Middle England is to be turned into a giant Soweto for Wealthy gypsies. Two Jags is doing to the people of Britain what "travellers" are doing to the countryside (Richard Littlejohn *The Sun*, 11.03.05).

This is accompanied by a cartoon of Prescott sitting on a toilet labelled 'Middle England' and apparently shitting upon the good people of Britain. The straight-forward inference being that just as Gypsies defecate across the countryside without regard for decency or

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<sup>3</sup> Text in bold and red typefaces reflect the original text.

the values of middle England, so the Deputy Prime Minister is using the power of his office to do the same thing to the same long-suffering people. 'Middle England' in the Littlejohn piece seemingly transforms from a reference to a specific group of people with shared values, (who opportunistically or not are identified as being readers of *The Sun*), into the physical reality of actual space, it is now 'Picturesque Middle England'. This is an extraordinary jump but it allows for a physical materialisation of psychic boundaries and in the process underlines an absolute understanding of belonging and, in the case of Gypsies of not belonging within these boundaries. The unholy alliance of 'wealthy' gypsies and two 'jag' owning politicians seems to hint partly at illegality and/or corruption but even more damningly it suggests that even with money and power these are people who lack taste and do not know how to behave like decent normal people. They are neither like *us*, nor can they ever be. The linkage between the Deputy Prime Minister and Gypsies is done in such a way that they mutually damage each other enormously; it plays off the 'otherness' of understandings of Gypsies against the corrupt image of politics and attempts to create a ring-fenced notion of belonging. The reference to 'two jags' is a long running jibe at John Prescott referring to his ownership of two Jaguar motor cars. In an odd sort of way this jibe mirrors the sense of anger levelled at Gypsy's ownership of 'flash motors', discussed shortly, which seems freighted with understandings of Gypsies as being at the bottom of society. They are not worthy to drive top of the range four-wheel drive vehicles. The image of John Prescott, (and one he has worked hard to maintain), is of being the last working class hard man in the New Labour government; the sneer of 'two jags' would hold little threat to many other government ministers and absolutely none at all to potential conservative candidates. The effect it has on Prescott though is to suggest he has got a little bit above his station in life. Finally the use of middle England speaks volumes about the notion of a society in which certain behaviours are deemed socially acceptable and understood. As a boundary making exercise it not only excludes the world of Gypsies but also any other native elements that are unable to understand the boundary lines.

In its lead story *The Sun* also stresses the strength of links between Gypsy groups and the ODPM by its analysis of government funding. It is claimed that £30 Million, (of taxpayers' money), has been spent on 'gipsy sites' and that this represents a trebling of spending by Prescott. (It is quite hard to pin down *The Sun's* figures, but the £30M figure seemingly represents spending over a period of several years. *The Sun* also conflates grant money from *The Big Lottery Fund* and Local Authority spending with other

government money). *The Sun* argues that despite a huge increase in spending on Gypsy sites there is still a problem with illegal sites, in its editorial comment *The Sun Says*;

*The Sun* has no quarrel with the settled gipsy community. The people causing trouble are those travellers who arrogantly think they can do what they like – while Mr Prescott encourages councils and police to run a blind eye (*The Sun* 21 03 05).

As with the breakdown of spending figures it can be a little hard to pin down who exactly *The Sun* means by *those travellers who arrogantly think they can do what they like*, however the answer appears to be within the analysis of earlier stories run by *The Sun* that describe two “illegal” camps, those at Wickford and Crays Hill in Essex. The Wickford site is condemned on the following grounds,

The sprawling **EIGHTY**-caravan camp boasts top of the range mobile homes and flash motors. But it is a squalid eyesore – blighting lives of villagers in Wickford, Essex. The 200 travellers squatting illegally in fields infuriate their law-abiding neighbours by roaring around in 4x4s, BMWs and Porsches. Shockingly there is even a £112,000 **BENTLEY** parked up. Yet each morning gallons of sewage overflows onto the roads. Stray dogs roam in packs, feasting on rats in the makeshift estate named locally as Hovefields. Just last Saturday a vicious fight broke out when a man with a samurai sword chased a teenager down the road. Two nights later a man was stabbed three times (*The Sun*, 11.03.05).

Plainly the most shocking aspect of the Gypsy site is their apparent wealth, presumably in comparison to their law-abiding neighbours. Whilst the references to dirt and illegality seem to articulate everyday shorthand for distinctions between Gypsies and non-Gypsies, the references to wealth add another dimension of difference. Again it adds a sense of impossibility around the behaviour of Gypsies meeting the standards of non-Gypsies; nothing, not even money, can transform them into acceptable standards of living. In some ways it almost suggests that Gypsies are invisibly marked as beyond society. *The Sun* argues that the Wickford site will receive retrospective planning permission on the say-so of John Prescott. Even disregarding how much or how little of *The Sun*'s description of Gypsy life at Wickford is true what is striking is how little of the description has any particular bearing on issues around planning law. Even if the description was an accurate

one these are not planning issues, they are issues about difference and about distancing Gypsies from respectable society. Okely notes that,

Travellers' existence is affected by the way Gorgios represent them. Travellers cannot escape the gaze of the Gorgio<sup>4</sup> (Okely, 1983:232).

The gaze of *The Sun* is driven by its desire to sell newspapers, but also, and this is made clear in the linkages made to John Prescott, with a politicised agenda. This agenda is not (yet) a straight party political agenda, at this point *The Sun* had not declared its support for either Labour or Conservatives in the election and its coverage of political issues, (with the exception of baiting John Prescott), was fairly even-handed. If anything the newspaper was painfully determined to be even-handed in the praise and criticism it hands out to both parties, perhaps suggesting a neutralised political agenda reflecting its best commercial interests. Within this context the *Stamp on the Camps* and related stories demonstrate that if nothing else in *The Sun's* gaze Gypsy politics fall outside of party politics and in a wider arena of public approbation. The suspicion is that *The Sun* were not attempting to set an election agenda with these stories but actually simply sell newspapers by appealing to commonly understood fears and prejudices of their readers.

The Conservative party's engagement is opportunistic and overtly politically motivated, but driven by similar understandings. That said once The Conservative Party made its position public *The Sun* had no qualms about stirring it into their own coverage. It is absolutely apparent that *The Sun* believes it is aligned with a broad swathe of British opinion, hence the references to Middle England characterised as law-abiding neighbours and taxpayers. In many respects this is hard to dispute the newspaper has the highest circulation of all the daily national newspapers in the UK. In the period March 2005 *The Sun* averaged a super soaraway daily circulation figure of 3,250,276 sales, (source ABC Data). This was nearly a million more sales than its nearest competitor *The Daily Mail* who averaged 2,383,384, and, far in excess of *The Independent's* meagre 258,505 sales. Of all the national daily newspapers, *The Independent* had the lowest sales figures in this period. *The Sun* represents and stands up for 'us', the reader, and presents the Gypsy population as an alien 'other' or 'them'.

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<sup>4</sup> *Gorgio* is more commonly spelt *gaujo* and is the Romany word for non-Gypsy.



### *The Independent*

The tone of *The Independent* is undoubtedly more sympathetic to the Gypsies it features but it is still interesting to examine the picture of Gypsy culture that emerges from its gaze. Many key themes from *The Sun* are examined in particular Michael Howard and the Conservative party's attempts at staking a claim to the votes of Middle England, an examination of John Prescott and the ODPM's recent policy development in relation to Gypsies and planning law and an examination of the historical failures of government to develop policies that allow sufficient sites for travellers in the UK.

*The Independent's* front-page story is built upon an interview with Bernadette Reilly a Scottish-Irish Gypsy. The first paragraph of *The Independent* story states,

Bernadette Reilly is furious. She pays for everything: her council tax, her road tax, her television licence. But, for as long as she can remember, she has endured abuse and hostility. Gypsies and travellers call it bigotry, and say they suffer it all over Britain (*The Independent*, 21.March 2005).

The article continues with a sympathetic and fairly detailed account of the impacts of bigotry upon Mrs Reilly and her family's life. It examines issues around the lack of sites and the political manoeuvring of the major political parties around these. It also allows Mrs Reilly to discuss the changing nature of her life from a more nomadic lifestyle to one that has become increasingly more settled. The successes of this transition include registering with a GP, children in schools and the friendliness of neighbours, whilst the failures include difficulties establishing planning permission to build on her father's land.

What is most dramatic about *The Independent's* coverage is the photograph of Bernadette Reilly with her daughter that runs on the front page; they both hold the camera's gaze looking tired but defiant, in the background are other young girls and a woman, a caravan and pitch marked out by a two-brick wall and a pram. It's a photograph that makes some specific connections to imaginary notions of being a Gypsy; the land around the van is barren, mostly dirt and stones; there is the hint of a large extended family in the unnamed women and children; and, there are suggestions of poverty in the clothing worn and the presence of a pram in the background. However what is really striking is that if the caravan in the background is blocked out then the photograph could almost be used to represent another figure altogether, one that embodies a white working class archetype. The formality of the setting gives a sense of resolve and strength to the woman and her

daughter that resonates with a traditional idea of the matriarch battling against the odds to get the best for her family. In other circumstances, (or other times), the photograph could be a family excluded from school by sectarian politics in Northern Ireland, a mother fighting drug crime on an estate in south London or the wife and family of striking miners during the pit strike. It's a generic image of sympathy *for* the white working class *by* the liberal, middle-class press. The gaze of *The Independent* is also driven by a desire to sell newspapers to another swathe of liberal-minded British opinion, and they have a clearly understood picture of a type of downtrodden, white working class.

In their representation of Gypsies *The Independent* presents a personal face, the face of the mother and daughter. In this respect the newspaper suggests it is engaged in a particular kind of honesty: it is willing to look the Gypsy woman in the eye. Unfortunately perhaps by the stereotyping of the woman in question it is not quite so up front and personal an engagement as might initially be envisaged. *The Sun* avoids any direct representation of Gypsies through photography; Gypsies do not appear in its pages individually. The defining images for *The Sun* have been aerial photographs of Gypsy sites that work in at least a twofold manner to emphasise *The Sun's* line on this story. Firstly they allow *The Sun* reader to maintain their distance from the Gypsy, their gaze is safely beyond arms length, looking in and down on the sites; *The Sun* reader is glimpsing an exotic world that is beyond his normal daily encounters. In this sense these photographs are read in a different visual language to that of *The Independent*. Taken from afar through a telephoto lens, we (the reader) are invited to peek in and recoil in horror; we are granted sight of a world in which we do not belong. Also by creating this physical distance *The Sun* is able to introduce a social distance between reader and the Gypsy subject, in doing so the consequences of the newspaper's vitriolic and hate-filled messages are placed at a significant remove. The lack of proximity distances the reader from a need to take a moral stand or as Bauman suggests '*the effects of human action reach far beyond the 'vanishing point' of moral visibility*' (1989:193). Secondly the nature of the photography makes a connection between the descriptions of Soweto used by the newspaper and the Gypsy sites, the sites appear in the same visual rhetoric as that associated with African camps or townships. In other circumstances, in another country for example, we might be asked to feel sympathy for their residents but these sites are explained as intrusions into '*our*' neighbourhoods.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 *The Misrepresentation of Gypsies*

Historically Gypsies have always been misrepresented and unsurprisingly this is reflected in the newspaper coverage generated throughout the 2005 general election. There are some aspects of the coverage that mark out this particular time as different in tone to what might normally be expected. The quantity of newspaper stories in 2005 is greater than in previous years largely reflecting the impact of *The Sun's* campaign and the Conservative party's intervention. It is unusual for such a concerted series of stories to be run by a single newspaper and, in the days around the Conservative party advertisement all newspapers, (and all media outlets), inevitably ran stories commenting on Michael Howard's comments. More importantly the tone of coverage appears very intense. As discussed, later in 2005 the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner noted that across Europe openly racist newspaper coverage seemed to be on the increase (Gil-Robles 2005). In Britain this is clearly evidenced by *The Sun* who attribute the Gypsy population with a list of derogatory attributes without fear of any punitive action in response. Generally this reflects commonly held racist views that have materialised for the last 500 years. What is different in *The Sun's* coverage is the open identification of boundary lines that are being drawn between different parts of Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities on the basis of notions of taste and respectability. This materialises in *The Sun's* use of language about 'middle England' in particular, where the paper seemingly demarcates actual physical space that is defined both by who lives in that space, the types of lives they lead and the naturally occurring allegiances that bond these people. *The Sun* is happy to include inside this boundary, groups such as those people they describe as the 'settled gipsy community' (21 03 05), whilst at the same time debarring lotto louts and the Deputy Prime Minister. There is almost a spiritual message in the politicisation of this debate, as though *The Sun* is entering into a holistic engagement about what community means for its readers. This appears in the surprising desire of *The Sun* and others to appear to engage in debate about the subject with their readers. So whilst *The Sun* asks its readers to write in with examples of Gypsy communities despoiling the world, other papers also ask questions directly of their readers be it 'Are these Britain's most demonised people?' (Independent 21 03 05), or, 'Can Gypsies live peacefully with neighbours?' (Daily Mail 21 03 05). In their own way all these questions seem to interrogate the dominant population rather than necessarily asking questions about the character of Gypsy communities. Posed as they are by the dominant population, they

need to be considered as in some way a self-examining, reflexive account by and of the dominant population.

They also point to the dialogic relationship that exists between readers and newspapers. Despite the provocative and forthright stance of *The Sun*, there is a clear feeling they are sounding out with their readers where the boundaries should be drawn. This is not surprising, as the largest selling newspaper title in the UK it is in the interests of the newspaper to be attuned to their readership's beliefs about society.

When the politicians become involved in these discourses, the very cynical amongst us might start to conclude they actually introduce very little that is new to the debate, but instead simply withdraw a little easy political capital out of the debate. What is interesting in the Michael Howard speech is the description of Gypsies being allowed to get away with one set of practices that would not be tolerated amongst the wider population. Ignoring the obviously unbelievable claim that in this unfair old world of ours it is the Gypsies who get all the breaks, what the Conservative leader does most effectively is to demarcate a line across which otherness can be understood. Its importance for Michael Howard is, that within a debate about who belongs and who does not belong, he can delineate political ownership of behaviours that maintain the purity of the boundary line within Conservative party policy, as opposed to Labour policy which is identified with breaking the boundary lines down.

Again in the political engagement there is a sense of politicians becoming involved in a dialogical context. If they take something from *The Sun's* campaign, they also add and comment back on the newspaper's original text in a very specific fashion. What is fed back into the hands of the media becomes re-fashioned within these cultural dialogues. The Conservative party, seeking votes, is keen to be involved in the dialogues around who belongs and who does not.

In both the newspaper accounts and in the Michael Howard speech, Gypsies do not appear in the flesh. There is very little feeling that what is being described by these different sources bears a direct similarity to the Gypsy communities who could be encountered throughout Britain. Instead a figure of the Gypsy appears to emerge that is constructed out of historical misrepresentations, and, out of other newer representations that reflect the interests of these contemporary voices. In the case of the Conservative party the figure of the Gypsy seems to be created with a very specific role in mind; that is

to undermine a particular arm of Labour policy. This Gypsy is set to work to demonstrate that the Human Rights Act is political correctness out of control because of the weaknesses of Labour leadership. In the pages of *The Sun* there is more than a hint of a lynch mob mentality being whipped up by the paper; the daily reiterations of a figure of the Gypsy totally abhorrent to the values of its readership has a surprising longevity to it. The figure outlasts the briefest flickers of celebrity status. This gives a clue to *The Sun*'s prime motives, which is surely headed by selling more newspapers. The idea of a campaign, and one that taps into a circulation war with the rival *Daily Mail*'s 'middle England' readership, suggests a longstanding strategy to sell papers day in, day out. Like the Conservative party's easy conflation of Britishness and nationhood and community, *The Sun* also seems to bring together larger indistinct groups, (such as 'Brits', 'middle England', or 'our readers'), within an umbrella that seems to hold up not just as the *The Sun*'s readership but something closer to nationhood. Again its about a sense of belonging, but shot through with the economies of the marketplace. Two years later *The Sun* also jumped headlong onto the bandwagon of disgust generated by Shilpa Shetty's racist treatment on the Big Brother game show by promoting an anti-racist media campaign, (which includes references to Gypsies) (BECTA 2007). One conclusion from *The Sun*'s seeming change of tack is that the newspaper is simply operates in an opportunistic fashion chasing sales. Finally, there is the liberalism of *The Independent* that creates its own figure of a Gypsy, one that again seems generated to appeal to the eyes of its readers and help boost sales.

All these representations seem to say less about Gypsies and far more about where the boundaries of society are being drawn. Its perhaps ironic the *The Independent*, should strive at times so hard to suggest their Gypsy is actually quite like the rest of the population: buying TV licences, paying taxes and worrying about their children's education. Almost to demonstrate that there is no difference, therefore the boundary line is an all-encompassing one in which Gypsies and *gajjos* can all live together. There is no such sentimentalism elsewhere, and both *The Sun* and the Conservative Party work hard to push the point that there are acceptable behaviours that are markers of society and falling outside of these means a falling beyond society as a whole. The 'otherness' that is being described marks groups such as Gypsies out as clearly being a threat to the nation.

The moment of the election seems important within these processes because Gil-Robles (2005) contention that racist representations of Gypsies were increasing, seems actually not to be true within Britain. In many ways this is one contention that would need to be

tested in more detail by examining subsequent coverage. The suspicion is that the tone of much coverage of Gypsy issues since 2005 whilst not pleasant has not matched the vitriol of *The Sun's* coverage at this time.

## *6.2 The Project/Research Methods*

More could be done with this research, (given time and money of course), to give it greater depth. It would make sense to conduct a far more detailed analysis of the available data to include all national newspapers, local news stories and other media content. The stories run by local newspapers in particular suggested a particularly rich seam of work that addresses very direct engagement of readers and newspaper producers. This seems indicative that the dialogical nature of cultural encounters between newspapers and their readers is a good path to follow. In addition a greater consideration of political and governmental action would help to tell a fuller story of what motivations lay behind the Conservative Party and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister amongst others. An examination of these areas was beyond the scope of this project. Wider political resonances could also be identified by examining the occasions when Gypsies appear in other political debates. Bearing in mind the delays in much parliamentary proceedings, the effects of the events of 2005 would need to be gauged in the following years. Many of the issues and the tone of the rhetoric of 2005 reappeared in the 2006 *Trespass with a Vehicle (Offences)* debate in the House of Commons (Hansard 28 February 2006) for example. This again suggests the continuing role Gypsies play with dialogues about society and its boundaries.

Perhaps the most significant other area to be examined is to form an understanding of how the Gypsy world perceives the work done by non-Gypsies to represent and construct a figure of the Gypsy. This dissertation, deliberately, has not engaged with Gypsy understandings of their identity and how these are formed in the face of a very hostile society. In large part this forms the basis of questions for my PhD which considers the creation of boundaries and difference from a Gypsy rather than a non-Gypsy perspective.

In writing this piece of work I always felt it should be constructed within a personal narrative. In part this reflects my understanding of the situating of misrepresentations of Gypsy lifestyles within everyday discourses; that is to say that although this project examines newspaper representations, these are clearly part of a wider engagement between newspaper producers and readers, they reflect ongoing discourse in pubs, over the office photocopier and in people's homes. In part it also reflects a sense in which my

own engagement with the ideas expressed in this work are in large part driven by my initial thoughts on reading two newspapers on a train headed north in March 2005. In writing this dissertation I have gathered my own tally of dialogic constraints; academic protocol, MRes dissertation module guidelines and personal ambition amongst them. At heart though the ideas expressed in this piece of writing do hark back to the instinctive responses I felt just over two years ago. My hunch then and my hunch now is that what materialised in March 2005 was an extraordinary distillation of the historic misrepresentation of Gypsies.

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### Howard: Fair play on planning



#### Speech at Conservative Campaign Headquarters

"I believe in fair play. The same rules should apply to everyone - whatever your background, whatever the colour of your skin, whatever your sex or religion. I don't believe in special rules for special interest groups.

We are all British. We are one nation.

I believe that different people, from different communities should be free to lead their lives in different ways. But freedom comes with a responsibility - the responsibility to do the right thing by your community.

Many travellers accept this, living happily in neighbourhoods across our country. Sadly, a small minority of travellers do not. They are openly abusing our planning system.

People claim it's racist to raise this issue. It is not. It has nothing to do with race. It's about standing up for the right values. It's about common sense. And it's about making sure that people abide by the law.

If you want to build a new home, you have to get planning permission first. And if you don't, you can be fined or forced to pull it down. That's fair enough because we need to protect our local environment.

But if you are a traveller you can use the so-called Human Rights Act to bend planning law - building where you like. That's just not fair. There shouldn't be one rule to travellers and another for everyone else.

This is one of the reasons why the Conservative Party is reviewing the Human Rights Act. And if can't be improved we will scrap it.

People realise that there are too many in Britain today who hide behind so-called human rights to justify doing the wrong thing. "I've got my rights" has become the verbal equivalent of two fingers to authority. The rights culture has blurred the difference between right and wrong and it's taking Britain in the wrong direction.

I believe in a Britain where fair play matters.

So people will face a clear choice at the election - a choice between a Conservative Government which upholds the law and Mr Blair who turns a blind eye when the rules are abused."

# I BELIEVE IN FAIR PLAY.

THE SAME RULES SHOULD APPLY TO EVERYONE.

I DON'T BELIEVE IN SPECIAL RULES FOR SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS.

WE ARE ALL BRITISH. WE ARE ONE NATION.

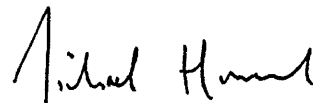
TOO MANY PEOPLE TODAY SEEM TO THINK THEY DON'T HAVE TO PLAY BY THE RULES – AND THEY'RE USING SO-CALLED HUMAN RIGHTS TO GET AWAY WITH DOING THE WRONG THING.

IF YOU WANT TO BUILD A NEW HOME *YOU* HAVE TO GET PLANNING PERMISSION FIRST. BUT IF YOU ARE A TRAVELLER YOU CAN BEND PLANNING LAW – BUILDING WHERE YOU LIKE THANKS TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT.

IT'S NOT FAIR THAT THERE'S ONE RULE FOR TRAVELLERS AND ANOTHER FOR EVERYONE ELSE.

THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY IS REVIEWING THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT. AND IF IT CAN'T BE IMPROVED WE WILL SCRAP IT.

FAIRNESS MATTERS. BRITAIN NEEDS A GOVERNMENT THAT STOPS PEOPLE USING HUMAN RIGHTS AS AN EXCUSE FOR BENDING THE RULES.



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**ARE YOU THINKING WHAT WE'RE THINKING?**

**CONSERVATIVE**

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